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Block the Khmer Rouge

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Cambodia suffered one of history's ultimate horrors when the Khmer Rouge, under Pol Pot's leadership, killed between 1 million and 2 million of its population. Incredibly, it now faces a repeat performance. With the impending September withdrawal from Cambodia of the Vietnamese army, the Pol Pot faction of the Khmer Rouge, still run by Pol Pot and his senior lieutenants, is poised to seize power again from the sanctuaries it runs with unchanged Draconian discipline along the Thai border.

Its major asset is the dispute among the other Cambodian political factions. The Khmer Rouge's strongest Cambodian opponent is the incumbent government established by the Vietnamese, and now being left behind, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). This government is dominated by former Khmer Rouge who defected, in fear or disgust, from Pol Pot to the Vietnamese.

The PRK was a puppet of the Vietnamese, and it does not run a multiparty state with human rights and free speech. But one thing is incontestable. It is not running a Khmer Rouge state with its emptied cities, suppression of every vestige of human rights, separation of families and widespread concentration camp conditions. It is clearly preferable, from everyone's point of view, to another Khmer Rouge government. And with the departure of the Vietnamese, this Cambodian government can be expected to take that nationalist course vis-a-vis the Vietnamese that Cambodians traditionally take.

The second strongest potential opponent of the Khmer Rouge, a distant second, are the forces of Prince Sihanouk and his ally, Son Sann. Serious voices now advocate American "lethal" aid (overt or "covert") to these forces. But as long as these forces maintain their now anachronistic coalition with the Khmer Rouge—a coalition designed by the West in 1982 when all efforts were concentrated on forcing out the Vietnamese—any such lethal aid would have to be expected to be used, in the first instance, against the PRK.

This could only help, militarily and politically, to open the door to the Khmer Rouge. After all, with full recognition of the errors of U.S. policy toward Sihanouk since the Eisenhower period, it is clear to all that he cannot now, by himself, replace the PRK while holding off the Khmer Rouge and thus return Cambodia to the peaceful rural kingdom of yesteryear.

Accordingly, any aid to Sihanouk (and Son Sann) should be subject to two conditions: that they withdraw from the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea, which the Khmer Rouge dominates, and that the aid not be used in a civil war against the PRK.

Indeed, the United States should support an alliance between Prince Sihanouk and the PRK, the terms of which they must work out themselves beginning, hopefully, at the meeting between Prince Sihanouk and the PRK's Prime Minister Hun Sen on May 2 in Jakarta.

In fact, the United States could usefully seek the cooperation of the Soviet Union to bring these two contenders together by using the separate influence of each on Prince Sihanouk and the PRK respectively. In addition, the two superpowers should urge the Peoples Republic of China to cut off the support it has long given the Khmer Rouge out of its antipathy to the Vietnamese. With the secretary of state going to Moscow just before the Sino-Soviet summit of May 15, this is an opportunity for the United States to play just such a constructive role.

Tentative agreement already exists at the international level to cut off military aid to all factions in September when the Vietnamese withdraw. Especially in such promising circumstances, the United States should put much greater emphasis on cutting off the lethal aid given to the other factions than in providing it to Prince Sihanouk. To jeopardize that cut-off for a few million dollars of lethal aid to Prince Sihanouk—aid which many observers consider of more political than military significance anyway—would be a colossal error.

U.S. policy in Cambodia has too many goals. Its single immediate goal should be to block the return of the Khmer Rouge. Then, in the fullness of time, we shall be able to press Phnom Penh, whoever is running it and in whatever period, to follow democratic practices.

But if we try to achieve all of the goals we might wish at once and in specified and controversial ways—installing Prince Sihanouk as the leader of an interim government with four parties (including the Khmer Rouge) and holding free elections with U.S. inspection of the Vietnamese withdrawal—we might well play into the hands of Pol Pot's lunatic but ruthless group.

In sum, in our opinion, to do other than to focus all our immediate efforts on preventing the return of the Khmer Rouge would be to make what is best the enemy of what is absolutely essential.

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